Viewing Religions Philosophically

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The word 'philosophy' itself involves a problem of definition. Moore and Bruder have stated that 'the problem is that what philosophy *is* is itself a philosophical issue, and the issue hasn't yet been settled.' Philosophy has been functionally divided into two types: Speculative Philosophy and Analytic Philosophy. While Speculative Philosophy is the branch dealing with the various philosophical systems that were brought forth by great philosophers, Analytic Philosophy deals with the clarification of meanings.

Etymologically, the word 'philosophy' literally means 'love of wisdom'. But this meaning cannot be held as the definition of the discipline, since any lover of wisdom cannot be called a philosopher today. Earlier, the various subjects now studied in the universities were once parts of philosophy; but later on, each of them separated from philosophy and formed into each own discipline. Still we can find branches within philosophy like the philosophy of science, the philosophy of politics, etc.

Philosophy, indubitably, seeks to integrate truth. It is an attempt to find the unity within the diversity. It is an attempt to have a wholistic view of reality by the rational synthesis of principles, facts, and evidences.

Philosophy and religion have often interacted with each other because of the similarity of fields of research they share with each other. In India they were integrally related. Earlier in the west, philosophy of religion meant defence of religious convictions. But modern perspectives have changed. Today philosophy of religion is considered to be under the domain of philosophy, not religion, and is a branch of philosophy that deals with questions raised by religious ideas like God, salvation, after death experiences, soul, supernatural phenomena, etc. A philosophical perspective of religion undertakes a free investigation of religion.

Philosophy of religion centers on the problem of God, which is a theological term. Whether called 'God' or 'Spirit' or 'ultimate reality,' this *Being* is considered to be one beyond which nothing else can logically exist. Philosophy doesn't proceed by assuming the existence of this God as theology does; rather, it investigates the concept itself. Questions raised in the philosophy of religion include questions like 'Does God exist?' 'Is knowledge of God through reason possible?' 'Is God identical or coextensive with the world?' 'Is God a Being, a Process, Mind, matter, or Being itself?'

Definitions of religion depend on the particular philosophy of religion advancing the definition. For instance, Oman defines religion as that which deals with the 'unseen environment of absolute worth which demands worship,' and James calls it as man's response to an undifferentiated sense of reality, to the

"more".' Thus, perspectives of religion are as varied as the philosophical worldview in and through which one observes religions.

Thus to view religions philosophically might mean to view them from any of the viewpoints provided by philosophical systems world over. It may also mean developing ones own philosophical perspective of religion, though, of course, no such perspective develops in a vacuum. *Basically, it means an attempt to investigate the fundamental infrastructures on which the various religious doctrines of the universe, man, the good, and truth are built.*

The three main fields of philosophy are:

1. Epistemology
2. Metaphysics
3. Value Theory

1. <u>Epistemology</u>: It is that branch of philosophy that investigates the nature, sources, limitations, and validity of knowledge. It addresses problems like the reliability, the extent, and the kinds of knowledge, truth, language, science, and scientific knowledge. It also involves the study of Logic.

Any study of religion can immediately reveal to a philosophy student the relevance of this branch of philosophy to the study of religion. For instance, religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism define the problem of human existence to be epistemological. It is ignorance, *avidya*, that has produced in man the tediousness and sorrow he is in. Each of the systems named above reject reason and experience as the true source of absolutely liberating knowledge; while, traditionally, in the west it has been rationalism and empiricism that were normally considered as the two main sources of knowledge. *Zen* Buddhism detests the role of logic in attaining truth. It understands Truth as being beyond logic. *Advaitic* Hinduism considers Truth to be ineffable and that which can be talked about only via negation as *neti neti.* Even Christianity has recognized this as the language *via negativa*. The apostle Paul talks about spiritual knowledge in contrast to natural knowledge, about a knowledge that a physically (empirical-rational) minded person cannot grasp, about things he had seen in heaven that were unlawful to be communicated among men, and about a peace that *passeth all understanding*. The Sufis talk about a mystic union with Truth.

While undertaking an epistemological view of religions, philosophers do understand that such religious claims as those given above cannot be right away dismissed. The history of epistemology bears witness to the fact that rationalism and empiricism themselves had suffered serious blows by western thinkers. It has been understood that after all these two, *viz.* reason and experience, might not be the only sources of knowledge. The Indian thinkers claimed that an other source existed, and it is called as *intuition*. Christian writers such as Watchman Nee had also regarded intuition as being the source of understanding in the spirit. Philosophers like Plato, Bergson, Descartes, Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant

had their own views about intuition. Mysticism holds on to intuition as the event of apprehending reality as it is; yet, accounts of mystic experiences widely vary from religion to religion.

Logic investigates statements, arguments, deductions, etc. But the great Chinese Lao-tze observed: 'One who knows does not talk. One who talks does not know.' 'Talk' here refers to 'talk' about the absolute. These many claims provide the philosophers with data for investigation.

Epistemology of religion deals also with issues raised by evidentialism and postmodernism with regard to religious claims. The interaction between epistemology in philosophy and religion occurs in a very wide scale involving a variety of philosophical theories of knowledge and varieties of religious claims regarding truth.

One's epistemological view of religion may also determine whether 'revelation' is necessary or unnecessary for obtaining religious knowledge or knowledge of liberating truth. Almost all the traditional Schools of Indian Philosophy regarding revelation as an authoritative source of knowledge. Of course, they had specific canons to judge the authenticity of any word that claimed to be a revelation.

2. <u>Metaphysics</u>: It is that branch of philosophy that studies the nature of reality. It addresses problems like the relation of mind to matter, the nature of the 'self', the nature of change, the meaning of 'freedom', the existence of God, the problem of evil, and the belief in personal immortality. Modern Science has contributed a lot to this field of philosophy.

In India, metaphysics or *Tattva Jnana*, was at the core of the six major philosophical systems. Each of the systems undertakes strenuous efforts to understand what the universe is all about, what reality is, what the human being is, etc. The Indian views of reality range from realism to pure non-dualism. Prekinetic Greek theories of physical reality also included monist, dualist, and pluralist views.

Various religions have various views regarding physical reality. The *advaitic* (non-dualist) view of the Vedantist differs from the *yin-yang* (dualist) view of the Taoist and the pluralist view of the Christian. Since each of the views have philosophical counterparts in the various schools of philosophy, interactions are bound to take place. Thus, a dualist of either the Pythagorean school or Platonic school would view the religious propositions of non-dualism and its philosophical arguments as having a counterpart in Parmenides and Zeno. He would also seriously investigate the claims as counteracting his own ones. A Christian pluralist, in the same manner, cannot shirk away the philosophical and metaphysical conclusions of the Vedantist and the Platonist. A pluralist who has studied Zeno's paradoxes, for instance, has to come up with an answer to the problem posed. Thus a Christian philosopher is forced into a philosophical investigation of the various metaphysical claims.

None of us were present at the time when the universe originated.[1] Various religious and philosophical theories also exist regarding the origin and nature of living reality. They include theories of Divine Creation, Interstellar origin, Hylozoism, and Evolution. To philosophically approach each of these theories requires an open and unbiased mind. The hypotheses given in the form of the above shown theories, a philosopher can go on to rationally evaluate them with reference to all available related knowledge of the universe and to rational and conceptual necessities.

At any instance, the various theories of origin do assume the principle of causality. The Indian philosophical systems do not disregard the concept of causality. Udayana of the Nyaya School of Indian Philosophy, for instance used the argument from causality to prove the necessity of the existence of God. The Mandukya Upanishad, on the other hand, employs arguments from causality to disprove the existence of changing phenomena itself. Recent developments in modern quantum physics, however, seem to indicate that causality, after all, might not really be a necessary principle of reality. We find here a combination of epistemological and philosophical problems. Here again we find an interaction between religions and philosophies.

Proponents of Vitalism like Schopenhauer and Bergson conceived of reality as evolving due to an ever-present inherent urge (will or *en vital*). Some modern scientists have already been exalting 'mother nature' as the propeller of evolution in contrast to the earlier view of 'blind chance' deciding the fate of what evolves.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to introduce the fact that the concept of creation *ex nihilo* is absent from most religious stories of creation. In them, the creation of universe occurs out of pre-existing matter (for instance, out of the body of *Brahma* in Hinduism). The first law of Thermodynamics does state that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. In other words, nothing can be created out of nothing. However, rationally and conceptually the universe cannot have existed eternally, since this would render impossible its arrival at the present. Kant's *Copernican revolution* of epistemology and modern theories of relativity and quantum physics offer interesting data for a metaphysician to work with in arriving possible conclusions.

Earlier on, the Scholastic tradition had, with the help of Greek philosophies, come up with certain arguments for the existence of God. Various philosophers in the course of history have subjected the arguments to rigorous scrutiny. This is an other example of how philosophers view religion, and how religionists or theologians view religion philosophically. The viewpoints are purposely driven either to justify or falsify the various claims of religion.

3. <u>Value Theory</u>: It is the branch of philosophy that includes subjects like ethics, aesthetics, social and political philosophy.

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[1] Whether the universe ever originated or whether it even really exists, and whether any of our existences began at our conception or we are pre-existent beings are themselves metaphysical issues.

Ethics is integral to any religion. Ethical prescriptions are based on certain fundamental ideas that are integral to the system prescribing the rules or principles of human behaviour. *A philosophical view of religious ethics is usually an attempt to investigate those fundamental infrastructures that give rise to the related ethical prescriptions.* Ethical theories in philosophy may be normative or metaethical. While normative ethics tries to define the criteria for distinguishing the right from the wrong, metaethics is concerned with questions of meaning, truth, and method.

Normative ethics can be divided into two, *viz.,* Teleological theories and Deontological theories. Teleological theories define the 'good' on the basis of consequences or ends. Deontological theories maintain that the morality of an action depends on factors other than the consequences. The Divine Command theory and the Categorical Imperative of Immanuel Kant fall under Deontological theories. While there are some that hold strongly that values cannot exist apart from religion, there are those who insist that values are strictly a human concern, and have nothing to do with either religion or God. Thus, religion and philosophy interact in the field of ethics.

It has, thus, been seen that philosophical and religious themes are often similar and the two systems interact. A philosophical perspective of religion is an attempt to understand what a religion is and what its fundamental presuppositions are. It also evaluates at the same time the agreement of the religious claims with known and proven facts.

And so, philosophically viewing religions means the use of philosophical tools, methods, and principles to understand religious claims and phenomena. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan called philosophy of religion an attempt by religion to come to an understanding of itself. There are a variety of philosophies and a variety of religious claims. Viewing religions philosophically may be via the speculative schools of philosophy or via the analytical schools of philosophy. Though philosophy of religion is not limited to a particular tradition, it does involve the study of a particular religion's claims and expressions.

The value of reason in the process of knowing the Truth has been high in both the west and the east. While revelation is accepted as a *pramana* or evidence in certain Indian schools of philosophy, the rational criteria to differentiate true revelation from fake ones are also set forth in them. Pure western philosophy, sundered from religion, doesn't give revelation the position that revelation gets in religion. Revelation, however, does have a significant role in Philosophical Theology. But to philosophy as a discipline in itself, revelation poses a problem. Philosophy is an independent activity to know the truth about self, the universe, and God. While philosophy asks the questions, religion claims to offer the solution, which provokes further questions *giving rise to the philosophy of religion.*

Thus, to view religions philosophically means to engage in an intellectual exercise to sort out through philosophizing solutions to questions posed by

philosophy and provoked by religions and thus come to an understanding of religion and religions.

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